



The Re-examination of South Africa's National Interests in a Post-International and Heterarchy Era

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Introduction

This study assesses South Africa's national interests and argues that they ought to be revised in light of the current international order, in which myriad non-state actors, ideologies, wars, the emergence of innovative technologies, and environmental threats challenge centralized state power. The study recognizes that postinternational theory departs from state-centric theory. Mathebula (2024) explains postinternationalism as a new world order encompassing a conglomerate of nonstate actors, including multinational corporations, civil society entities, technology behemoths, international normative systems, and global trends and influences. Mathebula (2024)'s definition is derived from the writings of James N. Rosenau, regarded as an architect of postinternationalism. James N Rosenau explains that the global system has become turbulent due to extensive change, making it difficult to understand global life solely from an "international politics" perspective, as much of politics extends beyond national boundaries and state-to-state relations. A central definition of heterarchy is central to the construction of this body of literature, its central tenets and thesis. Belmonte and Cerny (2019) define heterarchy as an organizational system in which elements are not fixed in a single chain of command but can be positioned in multiple ways depending on context.

The authors contrast heterarchy with hierarchy, which relies on a rigid top-down structure; a heterarchy distributes power and authority more horizontally, with different actors holding influence that may

shift or overlap across networks (Belmonte and Cerny, 2019). In the social and information sciences, it is often described as a network in which each element plays an equally significant role, though its relative importance can vary across situations.

Upon defining postinternational and heterarchy, the piece argues that South Africa's national interests ought to be reviewed, considering the postinternational theory and heterarchy. South Africa's national interests are framed around protecting state sovereignty and constitutional order, safeguarding the security and welfare of its people, fostering inclusive economic growth, and contributing to a fair and peaceful global order (Bohler-Muller, 2012). Grounded in the 1996 Constitution, it prioritizes democracy, human rights, social justice, and national unity domestically, while internationally, it emphasizes African unity, regional integration, Pan-Africanism, and reforming global governance through forums such as the AU, BRICS, and the G20 (Kotze, 2024). Guided by the philosophy of Ubuntu diplomacy, South Africa presents a people-centered and progressive vision rooted in interdependence and global cooperation (Kotze 2024).

The Notion of National Interest

In the 1940s, the scholar Hans Morgenthau deepened the concept of *national interest* by situating it at the heart of classical realism. He argued that the overall arrangements of states were rooted not only in power but also in the goal of maintaining, enabling, and advancing their power in the international system (Kotzé, 2024). Within this framework, power is perceived as the ability to pursue one's own ends without being hindered by external constraints. Morgenthau (1948) further stressed that national interest, defined in terms of power, provides a rational guide to foreign policy by anchoring it in objective considerations rather than ideological or moralistic ones. For him, this made *national interest* both a descriptive and prescriptive tool, descriptive in explaining how states behave, and prescriptive in guiding policymakers on how they should act to safeguard state survival and influence (Morgenthau, 1948). However, the realist understanding of national interest, while foundational, later came under criticism for its state-centric assumptions, paving the way for post-international theory as an alternative lens (Rosenau, 1990).

Post-international theory emerged as a response to the limitations and biases of traditional realist and neorealist approaches, particularly their narrow focus on states as the central actors in global politics (Rosenau, 1990). This dynamic resonates with the idea of heterarchy, where authority is organized through fluid, non-hierarchical, networked relationships. Even though authors only now call for a shift from the concept of hierarchy to 'heterarchy', historical evidence suggests that

heterarchy was already a feature of global empires dating back to the 2nd century (Subrahmanyam, 2022). This was downplayed by the introduction of the Eurocentric 'nation-state' narrative.

Understanding South Africa's national interests today requires situating them within both historical and contemporary global dynamics, where networked, multi-actor perspectives increasingly complement traditional state-centric approaches. According to Kotzé (2024), since the transition to democracy in South Africa, there has been a shift from a securocratic system of control over the population during apartheid to a human-centred approach that has ushered in a new dispensation with very different national interests. Three decades later, these interests have been further complicated by the establishment of the Government of National Unity (GNU) after the ruling party, the ANC, failed to secure an outright majority in the previous elections (Mafumo, 2024). This further underscores the need to reexamine South Africa's national interests within the context of a newer era of post-international and heterarchical perspectives.

Theoretical Review: Postinternational Theory and Heterarchy

Traditional approaches in International Relations have historically dominated the conceptualisation of national interest, framing the state as the centre of analysis. The realist school defines national interest in terms of survival, security, and power. At the same time, the liberal approach extends this by including key tenets such as interdependence and institutional cooperation (Clark, 1996). Furthermore, both paradigms assume

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that anarchy, hierarchy, and authority are central to understanding global politics. However, recent approaches to international relations, such as postinternationalism and heterarchy, have challenged these classical frameworks, emphasising nuances in actors, authority, and governance (Ferguson and Mansbach, 2007).

The postinternational theory by James Rosenau (1990) offers an alternative paradigm for understanding international politics. The theory posits that global politics are frequently influenced by the roles of non-state actors, international norms, the prevalence of conflict and war worldwide, and the processes of globalisation (Mathebula, 2024). Postinternationalism suggests that no sovereign state is powerful enough to be unaffected by

the “postinternational effect” of world politics (Mathebula, 2024). Instead, national interests are negotiated across multiple actors and complex networks beyond traditional diplomatic channels. It further demonstrates how geopolitical events can shape a state’s agenda and foreign policy.

The theory that often complements the post-international theory is the concept of heterarchy. In contrast to anarchy and hierarchy, heterarchy describes a global political system where power is diffused among a multitude of diverse, interconnected actors who constantly compete and collaborate across multiple levels, rather than being concentrated in formal intergovernmental institutions (Cerny, 2022). These interconnected actors overlap across multiple autonomous regimes within trade, finance, and security in a global system that lacks a central authority (Crumley, 2015). Heterarchy helps explain how various actors influence and are influenced by geopolitics, creating a complex and ever-changing global landscape (Mathebula, 2024).

Taken together, the postinternational and heterarchy theories offer a more contemporary guiding perspective on national interest as a fluid, multilevel construct rather than a static, fixed concept.

South Africa’s National Interest in the past decade

According to the former minister of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, Dr. Naledi Pandor, South Africa’s national interest is captured as follows: *“In crisp terms we define our national interest as encompassing national sovereignty and constitutional order, safety of our citizens, wellbeing of our citizens, economic prosperity and a better Africa and world”* (Pandor, 2022).

Since the inception of democracy, South Africa’s national interest has undergone transformative, rapid changes. National interests have not remained stagnant; they have aligned with national priorities and conformed to the geopolitical and international environment beyond South Africa’s borders. According to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (2023), South Africa’s foreign policy over the past 20 years has been characterized by an amalgamation of political, security, human development, economic,

ideological, and global interests. DIRCO (2023) further asserts that South Africa's national interests are derived from its domestic priorities, establishing a strict nexus between domestic needs and foreign policy. Some key marks of the domestic and foreign nexus include the African Continental Free Trade Area, spearheaded by the country and instrumental in fulfilling the economic interest aspect of our national interest through the promotion of free trade and investment. This is further accentuated through bilateral relations. The human development element of the nexus is expressed through South Africa's democratic and constitutional mandate, which distinguishes it by its ideologies of fairness, ubuntu, and transformation (Masters and Landsberg, 2024). From these two examples, it can be argued that the country has found some balance between its domestic priorities, national interest, foreign policy, and implementation.

Analysis

The key findings presented in this article reveal the complex nature of the international arena, compelling states to respond in a sophisticated and diplomatic manner that safeguards their sovereignty and national interests while positioning them as strategic players in global politics. South Africa has repeatedly found itself in unfavourable global political spaces, such as its non-alignment stance on the Russia-Ukraine war and its alliance with the BRICS+ alliance. While South Africa navigates many of these geopolitical factors, the state needs to maintain balance amid geopolitical shocks and in its foreign policy.

Postinternationalism and heterarchy posit that states ought to position themselves as strategic players. Herein, positionalities matter, as states need to situate themselves diplomatically to navigate geopolitics while fulfilling their national interests. For South Africa, this means, in the era of heterarchy, that the state must position itself in a manner that both fulfils and advances its national interest and strengthens its sovereignty and influence in the global arena. As the country continues to deem itself a moral actor in the heterarchy era, it ought to aggressively align its foreign policy with its national interests, as this multi-nodal system enables it to exert some relative influence in the international arena (Mathebula, 2024). In pragmatic terms, the

nexus between heterarchy and South Africa's national interest can be captured as follows

Political Interests – *National sovereignty and constitutional order: South Africa needs to adopt a realist approach to its influence and sovereignty in the international arena, while maintaining its moral order, by ensuring South African interests are fulfilled through international treaties and agreements, multilateralism, alliances, and international organizations. Reflect on the relevance of their partnerships and multilateral memberships such as BRICS+, the United Nations, and the African Union. Regarding constitutional order, the country must ensure that the ratification of international treaties strengthens South Africa's laws and their role in international law, its international standing, and its position.*

Economic Interests – *Economic prosperity: The state ought to ensure that its bilateral relations and positionality position it as a suitable investment destination, and that relations foster long-term, mutually beneficial trade agreements.*

Ideological and global interest – *A better Africa and world: South Africa should ensure that it continues to play a moral role in the African continent. Automatically, when the above interests are met, the safety and well-being of citizens become easier to attain and maintain.*

Conclusion

While politics extends beyond national borders, the duality of national interests, reflecting the current state of global order, creates a disjuncture in which South Africa's national interests need to be anchored in a heterarchical and post-international vision. This vision should posit the essence of South Africa's post-democratic national interest, foregrounding *Ubuntu* diplomacy, while adopting a multi-actor, multilateral, and global normative approach to the non-static nature of the worldwide order. South Africa's national interests have been organized along moralistic and idealist guidelines, centred on the transition from a securocrat system to one anchored in a human-centred approach. However, the crux of this piece has argued that the emergence of the GNU has exerted pressure on South Africa to consolidate its role within a global paradigm that considers the influence of geopolitics on the deployment of foreign policy and, by extension, national interests.

The role of post-international theory, in conjunction with the theory of heterarchy, is to offer an alternative analytical frame. This is most useful for examining the extensive role that non-state actors play in creating a complex, non-static global landscape (Mathebula, 2024). By using South Africa as a case study, the reinvention of understanding global paradigms of influence

introduces a shift from traditional approaches to state behaviour underpinned by national interests. Instead, it presents a framework of analysis that recognizes the role of global order as a catalyst for a non-state foreign policy, which in turn, creates a case for a re-invention of national interests that reflect current international developments.

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